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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001969

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SUBJECT: NGOS CITE WORRISOME HUMAN RIGHTS PATTERNS

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[1B.](#) CARACAS 01635

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Classified By: Political Counselor Robert R. Downes
for Reason 1.4(b).

[¶](#)11. (C) SUMMARY. Several prominent local human rights organizations recently released critical reports on the human rights situation in Venezuela. These studies document patterns of human rights violations, often allegedly involving Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) officials, agents, and sympathizers. At a monthly breakfast with NGO leaders and the diplomatic community, human rights activists continued to express concern about their safety and feared that President Chavez' proposed changes to the constitution may affect their ability to operate in their respective sectors. END SUMMARY.

Human Rights Issues

[¶](#)12. (SBU) The Office of Human Rights for the Catholic Church presented September 20 a report on threats against human rights advocates, including defenders of victims of state violence, labor leaders, and land rights activists, in Venezuela. According to the study, the conditions under which human rights defenders undertake their work has significantly deteriorated in the past decade, particularly since 2004. For example, between May 1997-May 2007, 72 human rights defenders were reportedly killed in Venezuela. Government security forces and officials were allegedly involved in seven of the 72 cases. During the same ten-year period, the Office of Human Rights registered 213 attacks, including violence, threats, and defamation of character via government-owned media outlets. The Catholic Church's report concluded that the BRV failed to protect human rights activists against violence or investigate attacks even after they were duly reported to government ministries.

[¶](#)13. (C) Director of the NGO Citizens for Security Rocio San Martin gave a press conference and released a report September 18 documenting political discrimination in Venezuela. San Martin noted that from January 2003 to June 2007, 1222 individual cases of political discrimination were reported in the country's four major circulation newspapers ("El Nacional," "El Universal," "Tal Cual," and "Ultimas Noticias"). Groups and collectives were also targets of political discrimination, most notably journalists and media owners, opposition student leaders, and former employees of

state oil company PDVSA. According to the report's findings, President Chavez and other high ranking BRV officials made over 200 politically discriminatory statements during the same time period. (Note: The Office of Human Rights and Citizens for Security are currently USAID grant recipients. End Note.)

Poloff Meets with Activists and Other Diplomats

14. (C) Poloff met September 27 with NGOs and members of the diplomatic community as part of a monthly meeting, hosted this time by the Political Section, to discuss the challenges facing NGOs. Human rights defenders discussed the difficulties of working in a highly polarized environment and shared their views on Chavez' constitutional reform package. Meeting participants included Carlos Ayala, a lawyer and president of the Andean Commission of Jurists; Andres Canizalez, a researcher at the Catholic University and journalist for Reporters without Borders; Jose Gregorio Guarenes, director of the Office of Human Rights for the Catholic Church; Mohamed Merhi, founder of VIVE, a victims of state-sponsored violence advocacy organization; and Solbella Perez, journalist for "El Universal" newspaper and member of COFAVIC, a long-standing human rights organization. Members of the diplomatic community included the French Ambassador, the French Political Counselor, the Argentine Political Counselor, and a representative from the Norwegian Embassy.

15. (C) As in previous meetings, human rights defenders expressed concern about their personal safety (Ref A). They highlighted recent examples of threats, violence, and BRV-harassment via the media against their colleagues. Specifically, they mentioned threats against Humberto Prado, director of the Venezuela Prison Observatory, and Liliana Ortega, director of COFAVIC. Prado reportedly continues to

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receive death threats. Moreover, government ministers have repeatedly accused him of fomenting riots in the country's prison system. The participants believe that the BRV is employing heavy-handed tactics in an effort to silence Prado's efforts to raise awareness on the abysmal conditions in Venezuelan prisons. (Note: Prado is generally apolitical, committed to prison reform, and is not affiliated with opposition politics. End Note.)

16. (C) Ortega and other COFAVIC members have allegedly been the victims of physical assaults, threatening phone calls and emails, and attempts by government officials to discredit the NGO's victims' advocacy work. A local judge summoned Ortega October 3 to hear the NGO's case, but the trial date was postponed. Ortega has denounced the BRV's failure to protect her against further attacks or investigate leads in accordance with an Inter-American Commission on Human Rights decision to grant provisional measures of protection on her behalf.

Chavez' Constitutional Package

17. (C) Participants also discussed the implications for the human rights community of Chavez' constitutional reform package and the upcoming referendum tentatively scheduled for December 2. The activists feared that Chavez' proposal to regulate international support for organizations with "political goals" or with an "electoral focus" would be used to obstruct all non-governmental activities in the country (Ref. B). Specifically, the proposal would deny NGOs foreign funding opportunities. They also noted that the proposed reform is strikingly similar to the Law of International Cooperation, which the BRV proposed in 2006, but on which they deferred legislative action following strong negative domestic and international criticism.

¶ 8. (C) Guarenas highlighted important differences between the 1999 constitutional reform process and the current one. In 1999, Chavez encouraged groups from civil society to submit proposals and included several grassroots proposals in the final document. However, during the current reform campaign Chavez has attempted to control all aspects of the process and has excluded other sectors from the discussion. According to Guarenas, Chavez plans to push the package through as quickly as possible and with few, if any, substantive changes.

¶ 9. (C) Consistent with what we have heard from other contacts, the human rights activists believe Chavez will continue to frame the referendum tentatively scheduled for December 2 as a vote of confidence on his presidency. They noted that despite significant disapproval among the "popular" sectors for proposals such as indefinite re-election and further centralization of power, Chavez sympathizers will vote in favor of the reform if they perceive his presidency is at stake. Perez added that COFAVIC and its affiliate organizations in the interior of the country plan to undertake a national education campaign to raise awareness on the reform package and its implications. Perez argued that it was the responsibility of NGOs to educate the public as much as possible without usurping the responsibilities of political parties. She encouraged other organizations to reach to their bases and organize discussion sessions as well.

COMMENT

¶ 10. (C) The reports released by the Catholic Church's Office of Human Rights and by Citizens Security received extensive press coverage in the local print media and independent all-news cable networks. Notwithstanding positive reporting on their work, human rights activists are concerned that elements of Chavez' reform package will severely limit their ability to work freely in Venezuela.

¶ 11. (C) Moreover, the activists overwhelmingly believe that Chavez' political machine will successfully pull off a victory during the December 2 referendum. Nevertheless, they are convinced they have a role to play in educating civil society and spurring greater democratic dialogue. They also expressed little confidence that opposition political parties had the ability do their share to put a dent in Chavez' plan to move the constitutional reform process forward.

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